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DETAIL FROM "THE VIRGIN WITH THE INFANT JESUS AND SAINT ANNE," IN THE LOUVRE
LEONARDO DA VINCI

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In Praise of Leonardo

"*Le divino e celeste Vinci.*"—VASARI

IT is fitting that the occasion of the four hundredth anniversary of the death of Leonardo da Vinci, falling as it has upon this year, should lead us to reflect upon the universal genius of this intellectual giant of the Renaissance. Not only does he stand side by side with Michaelangelo and Raphael, but his was an intellect, his a talent, his a power even greater than that which the gods bestowed upon these other two masters. Of this Jean Paul Richter said, in *Leonardo*, "As the earliest, so too was he the real initiator of the highest phase of the Renaissance. In the public eye he may not take equal rank with these artists, owing to the cruelty of fortune, which has robbed us of just his best and most beautiful work. To confront him with these painters, however, is to do him a manifest injustice; to institute a parallel between their works and his is no less unfair. Leonardo da Vinci certainly stands alone in the history of art, as one who both conceived and realized ideals which were wholly independent from the antique." And it was the Florentine poet, Gian Battista Strozzi who wrote

"Vinci costui pur solo
Tutti altri, e vince Fidia e vince Apelle,
E Tutto il lor vittoriosa stuolo."

which has been rendered—

"Vanquished [Vinci] all others had he,"

Surpassed he Pheidias and Apelles he out-ranked,

Likewise the proud troop of all their followers."

punning lines, but truth.

"As a matter of history," wrote Dr. Jens Thiis in his *Leonardo da Vinci*, "it should be realized that Michaelangelo builds, as much as Raphael, upon the foundation Leonardo created for the representation of figures. Leonardo was the first to break down in earnest the hierarchic barriers to art, the pioneer to display in freedom a human being. Attempts had been made before by Donatello, Mantegna and Polaiuolo, but Leonardo was the first to draw the human form unfettered by mediaeval or antique restraint and convention of style. Leonardo allowed the soul to flow without restraint into the movements of the limbs."

Good old Giorgio Vasari probably did not exaggerate a particle when he penned this tribute to Leonardo: "The richest gifts are occasionally seen to be showered as by celestial influence, on certain human beings, nay, they sometimes supernaturally and marvelously congregate in one sole person; beauty, grace and talent being united in such a manner, that to whatever the man thus favored may turn himself, his every action is so divine as to leave all other men far behind him, and manifestly to prove that he has been specially endowed by the



Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art
SHEET OF DRAWINGS BY LEONARDO DA VINCI

hand of God himself, and has not obtained his preeminence by human teaching or the power of man. This was seen and acknowledged by all men in the case of Leonardo da Vinci, in whom, to say nothing of the beauty of person, which yet was such that it has never been sufficiently extolled, there was a grace beyond expression which was rendered manifest without thought or effort in every act and deed, and who had besides so rare a gift of talent and ability, that to whatever subject he turned his attention, however difficult, he presently made himself absolute master of it."

And Giovio said of him: "He was of an extremely kind and generous disposition, of most striking appearance, with fine features. He was possessed of much taste, and had also a special talent for entertaining, which he notably displayed in the conduct of theatrical performances. He also sang well to the lute, and was specially welcomed as a companion of princes." But even before these records of Vasari and of Giovio an anonymous contemporary of Leonardo's, (as we will

find in a manuscript in the Magliabechian Library at Florence), wrote of the master that "his figure was beautifully proportioned, and he had a noble and engaging presence. He usually wore a rose-colored coat reaching to the knee, and long hose, as was the fashion of that time. His carefully combed hair fell in luxuriant curls as far as his waist." As Symonds puts it: "He conquered by the magnetism of an incalculable personality."

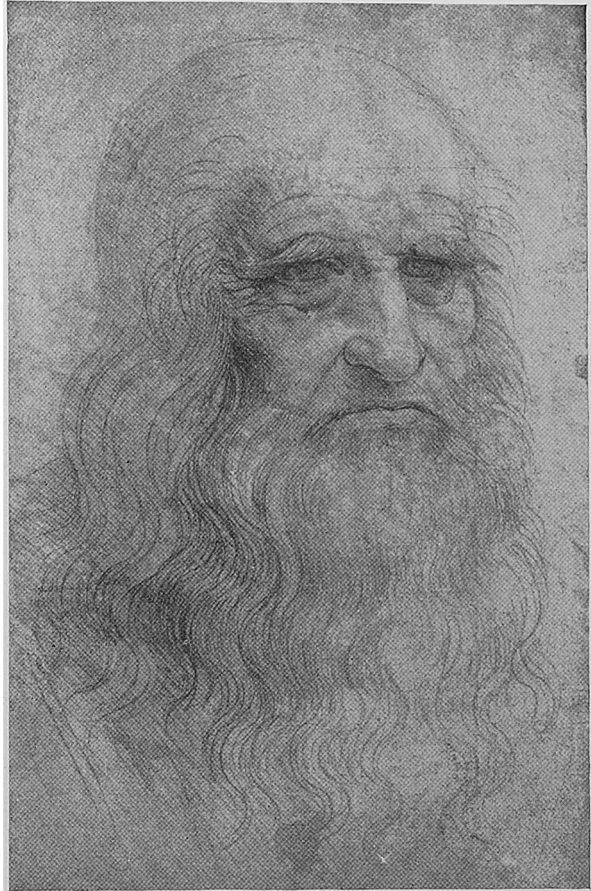
In *Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* Bernard Berenson writes of Leonardo: "And just as his art is life-communicating as is that of scarcely another, so the contemplation of his personality is life-enhancing as that of scarcely any other man. Think that great though he was as a painter, he was no less renowned as a sculptor and architect, musician and im-



Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art
ALLEGORY. DRAWING BY LEONARDO DA VINCI

proviser, and that all artistic occupations whatsoever were in his career but moments snatched from the pursuit of theoretical and practical knowledge. It would seem as if there were scarcely a field of modern science but he either foresaw it in vision, or clearly anticipated it, scarcely a realm of fruitful speculation of which he was not a freeman; and as if there were hardly a form of human energy which he did not manifest." Walter Pater said that Curiosity and the desire of Beauty are the two elementary forces in Leonardo's genius; curiosity often in conflict with the desire of beauty but generating in union with it, a type of subtle and curious grace."

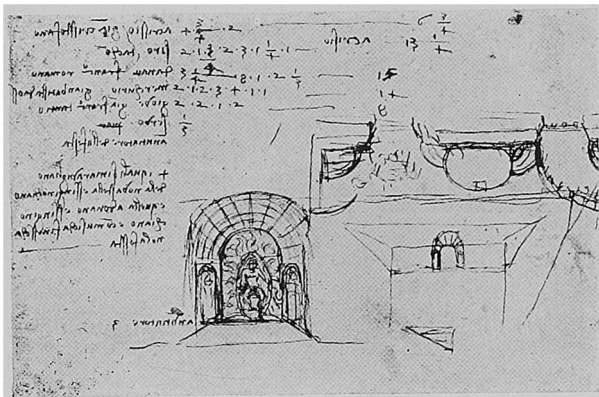
That so few works from Leonardo's hand exist is not the mere caprice of time and fortune. It is because Leonardo completed few pictures. We shall never know how many works he may have destroyed in his seeking for perfection. He himself it was who declared that "a painter will produce works of but poor quality who takes for his guide the paintings of others; but if he will learn from natural objects, he will bring forth good fruit. This we may see exemplified in the later Roman painters who by continually copying the work of others from age to age hastened the decay of their art. After these came Giotto, the Florentine, who, brought up among the mountains, with goats for his companions, yet found himself urged by



LEONARDO DA VINCI IN OLD AGE, SELF-PORTRAIT. SANGUINE DRAWING IN THE PALAZZO REALE, TURIN

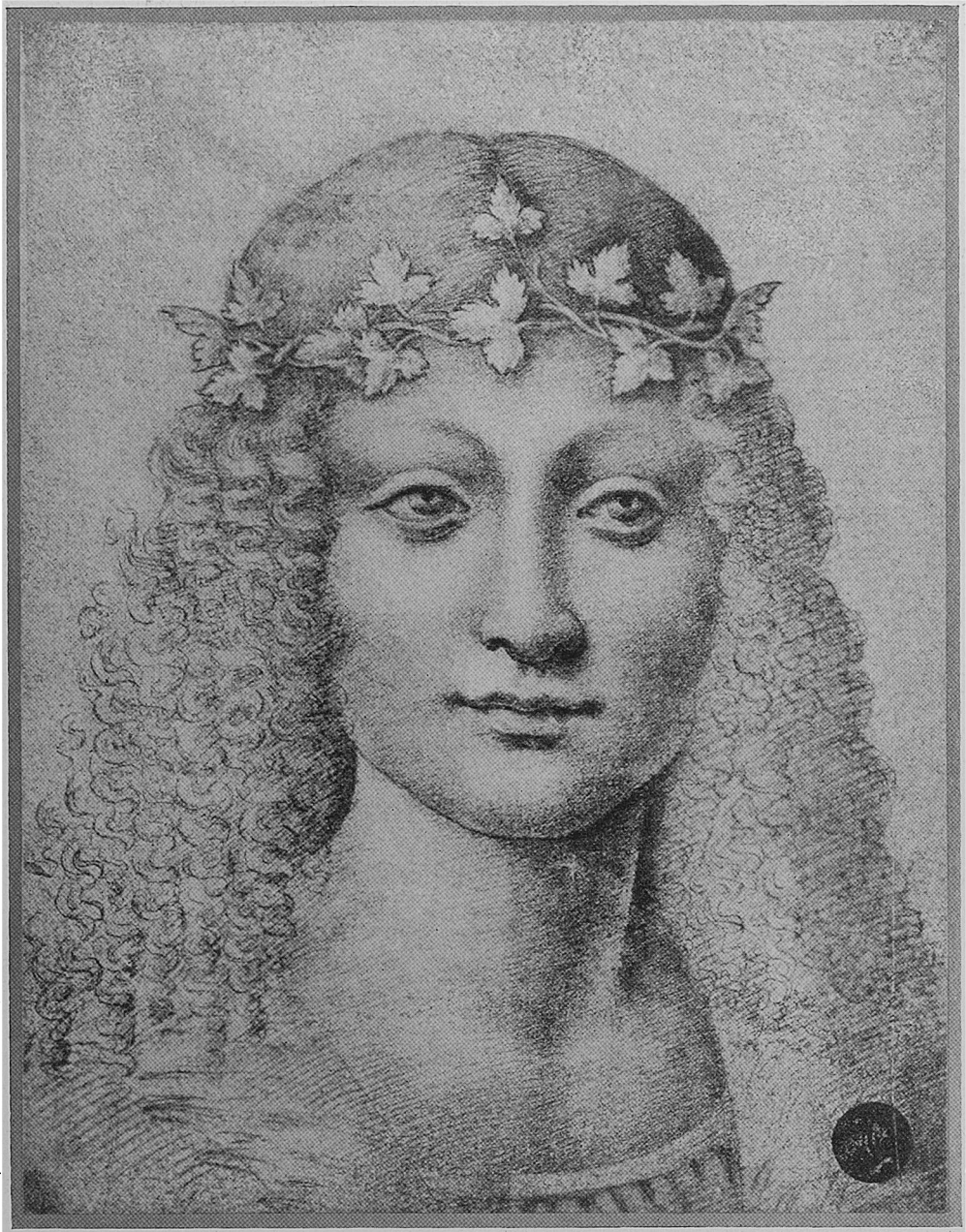
nature to be an artist and began by sketching upon stones the animals which he tended. From this he proceeded to copy all the other animals that he met in the neighborhood, and by these means acquired such a degree of skill as to surpass not only the artists of his own time but all those of many past ages. After him art again fell off, through continual imitations of pictures, until Tommaso of Florence—known as Masaccio—showed by the perfection of his work how fruitless were the labors of those who followed any other leader than nature, the mistress of all masters."

"When," says Reinach, "in 1483 Leonardo offered his services to Lodovico il Moro, Duke of Milan, in a letter that has been preserved, he recommended himself as an inventor of engines of war, a builder of movable bridges and chariots, an engineer skilled in the science of



Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

A SHEET OF DRAWINGS CONTAINING DIAGRAMS AND AUTOGRAPHIC NOTES BY LEONARDO DA VINCI



HEAD OF A BACCHUS. A DRAWING IN THE COLLECTION OF THE ACADEMY, VENICE
LEONARDO DA VINCI

artillery and sieges. At the end of his letter he adds: 'Item, I will execute sculpture in marble, bronze or terra cotta, also in painting I can do as much as any other, be he who he may.' It is evidently as an engineer, and inventor, that he esteemed himself most highly." In this connection let it be remembered that Leonardo's interest in instruments of war was on the side of preparedness for invasion, of devices for defense, for it was not his nature to wish to concern himself with war as a pastime for princes. Says Osvald Sirén (*Leonardo da Vinci*, Yale University Press), "Leonardo often addressed himself to some difficult task or other with the object of finding the ideal solution of a purely constructive problem. When he worked at the ducal palace at the Porta Giovia he did so at bottom for the opportunity of developing his theories on fortification; and when he constructed a model for a cupola for Milan Cathedral, his interest seems to have been chiefly engrossed by studies of the theoretical conditions for such work." On the Duke's vast Lomellina and Vigevano estates Leonardo constructed great irrigation canals. He tells us that by a device for regulating the river's flow "a large amount of land was irrigated and swamps drained, enabling the making of large meadowlands."

Leonardo it was who restored to us the laws relating to the use of the lever, lost since the time of Archimedes. What Stevinus disclosed concerning the laws of statics and hydrostatics we know Leonardo to have thoroughly understood a century before Stevinus promulgated his theories. Lombardini would have us nominate Leonardo the originator of the science of hydraulics. From Cialdi we learn that Leonardo was acquainted with the laws governing wave movements, applying these principles to the theory of optics and acoustics. We are reasonably sure now that Leonardo, instead of Cesare Cesarini invented the camera obscura. Tartaglia was anticipated by Leonardo in several of his discoveries in geometry. Leonardo's notes in the



HEAD OF A CHILD. A DRAWING IN THE LOUVRE COLLECTION. BY LEONARDO DA VINCI

Codex Atlanticus, preserved in Milan, indicate his conviction that a boat could be propelled by steam. He is to be credited with a breech-loading cannon.

This is the Leonardo who found time to read the *Plinio* of 1476, the Venetian *Bibia* of 1471, *De Re Militaria*, Piero Crescentio's *De Agricultura*; and the *Donata* of 1499, the *Justino* of 1477, the *Giova di Madivilla* of 1495, Diogenes Laertes *Volute à Vite di Filosofo*, the *Lapidario*, the *Spero*, (a cosmography), the *Cibaldone* (a treatise on hygiene), the *Isops* (*Æsop's Fables*) among the other books of his day, the Leonardo who borrowed the Dante from Nicolo della Croce, a book on anatomy from Alessandro Benedetto and who probably spent as much time in reading and in study as did Raphael in painting.

"Leonardo da Vinci was not only both an excellent painter and a veritable Archimedes; he was also a very great philosopher," wrote Geoffroy Tory, in 1524, five years after Leonardo's death. But as definitions change in the course of centuries we are warned by Prof.



DRAWING IN THE STYLE OF LEONARDO, LOUVRE

Giovanni Gentile of the University of Rome not to assume for Leonardo a place among the philosophers, though as a thinker, his unique position stands unchallenged.

But of Leonardo, the painter? The Milanese certainly appreciated his unique work as an engineer, but it is as an artist that his praises were sung by his contemporaries, both in prose and rhyme. Bellinzoni, the poet refers thus to Leonardo in his verses on Gian Gallazzo's wedding:

"Qui come l'ape al mel vienne ogai dotto,
Di virtuosi ha la sua corte piena,
Da Fiorenza un Apelle ha qui condotto."

Which Richter has rendered:

"As comes to honey-laden flowers the bee
So hither comes the learned; and his court
Is filled with cunning artists; also he
Has from fair Florence an Apelles
brought."

And again Bellinzoni wrote:

"Del Vinci e suoi pennelli e suoi colore
I moderni e gli antichi hanno paura."

Given by Richter as

"Da Vinci, colors and his brush in hand
In awe makes men of old and modern
stand."

Ariosto, too, places Leonardo first with
Andrea Mantegua and Gian Bellini:

"E que: che furo a nostro de et son horo
Leonardo, Andrea Mantegua e Gian
Bellino."

Giovanni Santi, father of Raphael, couples
Leonardo's name with that of Perugino
in a verse reading

"Due giovan, par d'etate e par d'onore,
Leonardo da Vinci e 'l Perugino
Pier della Pieve, ch' è un divin pittore."

No artist, says Eugene Müntz, in his work on Leonardo, was ever so absorbed on the one hand by the search after truth, on the other, by the pursuit of an ideal which should satisfy the exquisite delicacy of his taste. No one ever made fewer sacrifices to perishable emotions. "In the five thousand sheets of manuscript he left us, never once does he mention a woman's name, except to note with the dryness of a professed naturalist, some trait that has struck him in her person: Giovannina has a fantastic face; she is in the hospital, at Santa Catarina. This is typical of his tantalizing brevity." Says Symonds: "Beauty, inexpressive of inner meaning, must, we conceive, have had but slight attraction for him. We do not find that he drew 'a fair naked body' for the sake of its carnal charm, his hasty studies of the nude are often faulty, mere memoranda of attitude and gesture. The human form was interesting to him either scientifically or else as an index to the soul." As Dr. Jens Thiis remarks: "Leonardo's writings give no information regarding the conduct of his life. His journals are the most reticent and reserved that have ever been penned. We may play the spy, we may listen and peep through keyholes, but we shall seek in vain for the slightest indiscretions. On the subject of his own private life, and of his loves, he preserves an absolute silence." But his canvases are not silent! If, says Müntz

(*Leonardo da Vinci*, Heinemann) we turn to his evocations of the feminine ideal, "the same freshness, the same variety delight us here, his women are now candid, now enigmatic, now proud, now tender, their eyes misty with languors, or brilliant with indefinable smiles." "Leonardo," wrote Hermann Grimm in his *Life of Michaelangelo* "is not a man whom we could pass by at will, but a power which enchains us, and from the charms of which no one withdraws who has once been touched by it. He who has seen the Mona Lisa smile, is followed forever by this smile, just as he is followed by Lear's fury, Macbeth's ambition, Hamlet's melancholy and Iphigenia's touching purity." And Walter Pater said: "His type of beauty is so exotic that it fascinates a larger number than it delights, and seems more than that of any other artist to reflect ideas and views, and scheme of the world within, so that he seemed to his contemporaries to be the possessor of some unsanctified and secret wisdom; and to Michelet and others to have anticipated modern ideas. He trifles with his genius, and crowds all his chief work into a few tormented years of later life; yet he is so possessed by his genius that he passes unmoved through the most tragic events, overwhelming his country and friends, like one who comes across them by chance on some secret errand." Lomazzo it was who declared that whoever has seen the *Mona Lisa* must admit the supremacy of art to nature, "art having a far higher and more subtle method of fettering the interest of the thoughtful." Of *The Last Supper*, in the Convento delle Grazie, Milan, Pater wrote: "On the damp wall of the refectory, oozing with mineral salts, Leonardo painted the *Last Supper*. Effective anecdotes were told about it, his re-touching and delays, they show him refusing to work except at the moment of invention; scornful of anyone who supposed that art could be a work of mere industry and rule, often coming the whole length of Milan to give a single touch." This painting has been called

the compendium of all Leonardo's studies and all his writing.

Of Leonardo's drawing Berenson says (*The Drawings of the Florentine Painters*) it gives the feeling "of unimpeded, untroubled, unaltered transfer of the object in his vision to the paper, and thus to our eye; while at the same time, this vision of his has such powers of penetrating, interpreting or even transfiguring the actual, that, no matter how commonplace or indifferent this actual would seem to ourselves, his presentation of it is fascinating and even enchanting. And yet so little of effort is there to be perceived in this wonderful alchemy, that it is as if suddenly, by the mere feat of the demiurge, earth were transubstantiated to Heaven."

"No artist," said Richter, "has ever studied anatomy so deeply as did Leonardo . . . All that he says on the subject



DRAWING OF THE FIGURE OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN AND THE INFANT JESUS. A STUDY BY LEONARDO DA VINCI IN THE UFFIZI COLLECTION

of osteology and the movement of muscles possesses no less value for the student of medicine than for the student of art. The accuracy of his anatomical drawings have perhaps never been equalled."

Leonardo da Vinci knew precisely the thing for which he was striving, already had assessed its valuation. He, himself, declared that "The most worthy thing is that which satisfies the most worthy sense." Throughout the three periods in which his life may be divided,—thirty years in Florence, twenty years in Milan and nineteen years in wandering, Leonardo lived as he believed life should be lived, at least as he believed he should live it. Someone has said that he is the nearest that any man has ever come to Aristotle's Supreme Being, that he lived always in the moment and overcame mankind by his spontaneity. "To the ambitious," wrote Leonardo, "whom neither the boon of life, nor the beauty of the world suffices to content, it comes as a penance that life with them is squandered and that they possess neither the benefits nor the beauty of the world." But in his passion for intellectual pursuits let it not be forgotten that Leonardo said: "Where there is most power of feeling, there of martyrs is the greatest martyr." Perhaps Leonardo's religion might be summed up in his emphatic

declaration, "Falsehood is so utterly vile that, though it should praise the great works of God, it offends against his divinity." He had written "Truth has ever been but a daughter of the age."

Four hundred years ago the great Leonardo breathed his last at Cloux in France. "Sore wept King Francis when he heard from Melzi that Da Vinci was dead, who, when living in Milan, painted the *Last Supper*, a picture which excels every other." And Melzi wrote to Giuliano, Leonardo's brother, "He was to me the best of fathers, and it is impossible for me to express the grief that his death caused me. Until the day when my body is laid under ground, I shall experience perpetual sorrow, and not without reason, for he daily showed me the most devoted and warmest affection. His loss is a grief to every one, for it is not the power of nature to reproduce another such man." To Francesco Melzi he left his papers, to Salai and his servant, Battista de Vilani, his garden near Milan and to his brother the sum of four hundred ducats deposited at Santa Maria Nuova in Florence. In later years Melzi wrote: "Leonardo had received from the sun the faculty of fashioning all that the human understanding had ever been able to conceive or imagine within the seven liberal arts."

A Grey Sunday

BY FITZROY CARRINGTON

Sweet pearl-grey quietude and peace,
Faint whispering brooks, soft waving trees.
And gentle thoughts akin to these
Bid every restless thought to cease.

A pheasant in the shadowy wood,
The little birds in bushes near,
Sing out their anthem, brave and clear,
The world is fair and God is good.